Ajaccio

Corsica is a mix of stylish towns, dense forests and high peaks. Luigi Vallero visited Ajaccio, the largest of four airports on the island, situated in the Campo dell’Oro to the east of the city.

Set in a picturesque location on the northern shores of a gulf bearing its name, the city of Ajaccio lies at the foot of densely wooded hills that flank its northern and western boundaries. A harbour visited by cruise ships and ferries from mainland France lies close to the original citadel, and the city’s maze of tiny streets, gardens and museums are strung out for some miles along the valley of the Gravona River.

The small, bustling commune is home to the prefecture of Corse-du-Sud and is the administrative centre of the Collectivité Territoriale de Corse as well as being the largest population centre on the island, with 65,000 inhabitants. The famous French military and political leader Napoléon Bonaparte was born in Ajaccio in 1769 – his birthplace, Maison Bonaparte, is now a public museum.

Traffic is a mix of full service and low-cost airlines, including easyJet flights to Basel, Geneva, London Gatwick and Paris.

Small beginnings

Commercial aviation came to Ajaccio in 1935, when regular seaplane services began connecting the city’s harbour with Marseilles. The first runway dates further back to when a grass strip was marked out on one of the few flat areas close to the city – on the alluvial plain close to the mouth of the Gravona and Prunelli rivers, not far from where the current airport is situated. The Aéroclub de la Corse set up on the site at the Campo dell’Oro (the field of gold, which is thought to refer to the area originally being regarded as a rich, cultivated ground) in 1935.

Early in World War Two, a unit of the Vichy French Air Force moved into the Campo dell’Oro airfield, and an additional east-west grass runway was laid. Later in the conflict Armée de l’Air (French Air Force) Fighter Group GC2/7, a French unit of the Royal Air Force, started flying Supermarine Spitfires from the airfield.

The weak, unpaved surface and the surrounding hills imposed restrictions on flying that meant the field could not be used by larger aircraft, and accidents became a common occurrence.

In 1944, the US Army Air Force took over and upgraded the runway by laying metal grids on the surface. A North American

Airport Corsica maintains Public Service Obligation routes to Marseilles and Nice using ATR 72s including F-GRPK (c/n 727). (All photos author except where stated)
Tourism and growth
European package tours really took off in the 1970s and the island's idyllic location in the Mediterranean made it popular with those who chased summer sun. A tragedy occurred on September 11, 1968 when Air France flight AF1611, operated by Caravelle F-BOHB, departed from Ajaccio when the plane crashed on approach to Nice Côte d'Azur Airport, taking 95 lives.

Air Inter and the then recently founded, locally based CCM Airlines (Compagnie Aérienne Corse Méditerranée) connected the island to Lyons and Toulon in addition to the traditional mainline services to Paris, Marseille and Nice. Another local commuter airline, Kynair, even tried to base at Orly airport. The work included extending the north-south runway and a temporary airstrip, the construction of a new main passenger terminal.

In 1957 the Chambre de Commerce et d'Industrie d'Ajaccio et Sartène (the local chamber of commerce) took over the management of the airport. It proposed the construction of a new terminal and control tower complex, work on which commenced in 1958. The new facilities opened in 1961. Initially served solely by Air France Douglas DC-3s and DC-4s, the French carrier brought the jet era to Corsica in the 1960s when it introduced Sud Aviation SE-210 Caravelles on routes from Marseilles, Nice and Paris. A tragedy occurred on September 12, 1968 when Air France flight AF1611, operated by Caravelle F-BOHB, departed from Ajaccio when the plane crashed on approach to Nice Côte d'Azur Airport, taking 95 lives.

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The demand for flights to Corsica is such that the Nantes, Rome Fiumicino and Toulon. The seasonal services to Clermont-Ferrand, Liège, that include Lyon and Toulouse, alongside the Corsican flag year-round to destinations to Marseilles and Nice using ATR 72s. France, to Orly and Marseilles with A320s, and it flies the PSO routes, code-shared with Air France in co-operation with Air France. Air Corsica in co-operation with Air France. Ajaccio is the main base for Air Corsica (the renamed CCM Airlines), the island’s flag carrier.

In addition to its PSO routes, Air Corsica flies the Corsican flag year-round to destinations that include Lyon and Toulouse, alongside seasonal services to Clermont-Ferrand, Liège, Nantes, Rome Fiumicino and Toulon. The demand for flights to Corsica is such that the airline wet leases larger aircraft, including Boeing 747-400s, during the peak holiday season. Air France operates alongside Air Corsica on the PSO route to Paris, sharing costs and revenue. The French national carrier normally uses A320s on these routes, while regional services to Agen, Bordeaux, La- Gaillarde, Castres-Mazamet, La Rochelle, Lille, Metz-Nancy-Lorraine, Pau, Pottiers, Rennes and Strasbourg airports are flown by its regional partner Hop!, using a mix of ATR 72s, Bombardier Regional Jets and Embraer E-Jets.

The other airline competing on the trunk routes is XL Airways France, which deploys A320s on seasonal services to Lille and Paris Charles de Gaulle, although at peak times it puts additional capacity into the market using A330s. Meanwhile, Air Mediterranée serves Paris Charles de Gaulle and Chalair Aviation has recently introduced ATR 42s on connections to Limoges and Perpignan.

Since moving into the airport in 2006, the Continuité Territoriale, a public service obligation (PSO) guarantee regulated by the local government. The agreement specifies the frequencies, schedules, capacity offered and fares available to Corsican citizens, and the PSO services are currently flown by its regional partner Hop!, using a mix of ATR 72s, Bombardier Regional Jets and Embraer E-Jets.

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Transavia has also recently introduced air links to Amsterdam, and Norwegian Air Shuttle connects Corsica to Scandinavia by flying to both Oslo Gardermoen and Stockholm Arlanda.

This summer, other European carriers offering services to Ajaccio included Thomas Cook Airlines Belgium and Brussels Airlines from Brussels; Jetairfly from Châteauroux and Châlons Vatry; Luxair from Luxembourg; Swiss from Geneva; and SmartWings serving Bratislava. Charter services are also provided by British Airways, Darwin Airlines and Travel Service.

Although airlines dominate at Ajaccio, there is room for the rest of aviation. Being a heavily forested area, the Sécurité Civile maintains a base at the airport from where its Canadair CL-415 and specially modified Bombardier Dash 8-Q400 fire bombers operate when the risk of forest fires is high. Light and corporate aircraft also have their own area at the airport, and even helicopters from yachts moored offshore occasionally drop in for fuel or to bring owners ashore. Corsica, with its charming towns and villages, and large park and forest, will to continue to woo tourists in the coming years, and LCCs will bring even more curious travellers to the island.

Napoléon Bonaparte Airport has spare capacity, and seems to have a bright future as a convenient stepping off point for these visitors as the traffic grows.

The airport sits in the sun waiting to make another flight to Paris.

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Acknowledgements

Work on a modern air traffic control tower started in 2006 and it opened two years later. The old structure was retained and is used as administrative offices.

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